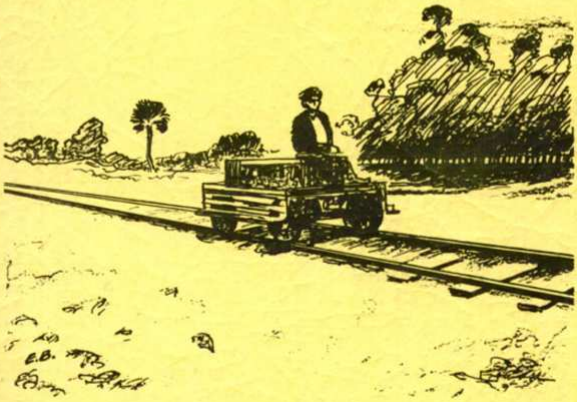
EARLY DAYS
IN
MELBOURNE BEACH
1888 ~ 1928

Frank J. Thomas



RAPID TRANSIT TO OCEAN

Best wishes to the Miller's,

Frank J. Thomas

EARLY DAYS IN MELBOURNE BEACH 1888 – 1928

By Frank J. Thomas

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1968

To

Annie – Hellen

PREFACE

The writer is grateful to many Melbourne Beach residents for their help in this history and would especially like to cite Mr. Don Beaujean, Miss Ruth Ryckman, Mrs. Ella Oliver, Mrs. Lida Lawrence and Mrs. Ethel Sweet for their reminiscences of early days. Other sources will be found in the bibliography.

This history of the early days in Melbourne Beach is an attempt to record an accurate, yet compendious, account of a fascinating period in Florida history. Florida remained a frontier far longer than any other Eastern state, and it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the southern portion began to receive immigrants in any number. They came for various reasons: for land, for restored health, for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. They dreamed, as all immigrants have dreamed. A few found their Eldorado. Most did not. Many of the weak, the disillusioned, returned to their Northern homes. The committed, the more determined, stuck it out. The story of Melbourne Beach's first forty years is a microcosm of the struggles that many other Florida communities encountered. This work, essentially, is the story of those who came and "stuck it out" between the years 1888 and 1928.

The writer has attempted to be concise and readable and has taken pains to avoid "academic" prose. EARLY DAYS IN MELBOURNE BEACH: 1888-1928 is selective history: enough research was undertaken to have made this work many times its present length. But then, perhaps it would have been less readable. The writer feels that brevity, indeed, is a virture.

PROLOGUE

Unchanging, the east coast of Florida lay for centuries in the sunlight. Easternmost, separated from the mainland by the Indian River, about midway the state, and running from present day New Smyrna Beach in the north to Fort Pierce in the south, extended a palmetto covered island, a portion of which the town of Melbourne Beach now occupies.

The first European account of any detail we have of this area comes from a young Spanish soldier, Alvaro Mexia, who was stationed in the settlement of St. Augustine and journeyed down the Banana and Indian Rivers in 1605. The Derrotero of Alvaro Mexia refers to the Indian River as the "great Bay of Ais." He notes an Ais Indian town at the southern tip of Merritt Island and further observes that "it is the custom of these coastal tribes to winter on the islands and with the advent of the mosquito and sand fly season to move inland." An Ais Indian village probably existed on the site of present day Eau Gallie.

In God's Protecting Providence, Jonathan Dickerson, who was shipwrecked in this area in 1696, states that the Indians were most primitive; they were non-agricultural, and their diet consisted entirely of palm berries, coco plums, sea grapes and shellfish. From holly berries they made an intoxicating (and nauseating) drink called casseena.

By 1760 they were gone. What had happened to them? No one knows. It is reported that there were slave raids into this territory from the Carolinas after 1700. Perhaps disease killed many of them. Or perhaps too much casseena. They vanished-yet another of the mysteries of history will probably never be unraveled.

Centuries passed without change in this timeless land. Nature was abundant, yet harsh. Ironically, this was one of the most habitable of lands for the white man. Nature provided an abundance of food-fish and game of every description and shellfish without number. It provided a sub-tropical climate with endless days of sunshine. Yet cruelly, harshly nature also gave massive swarms of blood-sucking mosquitoes and stinging sand flies.

Along this coast, time seems to have stood still. The seasons came and went, as now, with an unperceivable softness. Days fell upon nights with a rhythm as regular and steady as the never-ending tides. The wind rustled palm trees, gently it stirred the palmetto brush, as season upon season, century upon century, the moon rose out of the Atlantic to bathe the island in its forlorn half-light, to make ever-changing shadows in the scrub, where creatures lived in a never-ending struggle for survival--bears, deer, raccoons, opossums, snakes, rats, quail and turkey. And on the banks of the brackish Indian River alligators bellowed and shifted and hunted the night through and the phosphorescent calmness of the river itself was broken repeatedly by the splash of leaping mullet.

Nothing changed. Time rested. The moon made its ten thousand circuits over the island, the sharp animal cries in the night came and went, the glut and hiss of the tides never ceased.

PART I

In the year 1883, Major Cyrus E. Graves, a retired Union veteran from Boston sailed into Melbourne Harbor. He was searching for a retirement home and a place to invest his wealth. He was impressed by southern Brevard County, and decided to buy government land on the peninsula opposite Melbourne.

During the next four years, he bought some four hundred acres which comprises present day Melbourne Beach. The price--$1.25 an acre. The first recorded sale, as shown in the Deed Book in the Brevard County Courthouse, is for 71 acres and 36 hundredths on June 8, 1883.

The next year while visiting his home city of Boston, he somehow came upon the idea that pineapples would thrive on his land. In the fall of 1885 on his return, he had an acre cleared at what is now the west end of Avenue A and set out 10,000 pineapple plants.

Others came on the scene. Prominent among them was Captain Alfred Wilcox, an uncle of Don R. Beaujean who presently resides in Melbourne Beach. Mr. Beaujean's father, R. W. Beaujean, interested Captain Wilcox in the possibilities of this land as a resort.

Wilcox was a promoter. He immediately saw the possibilities of making Melbourne Beach (as Major Graves now called it) the Riviera of America. This typical American dream the men of Wilcox's generation called Vision.

This eager gentleman approached Major Graves and made a deal. In the summer of 1888, Wilcox was deeded 160 acres south of what is now Ocean Avenue and running 150 feet south of Sixth Street, reserving an acre in the northwest corner for a park. In return, Wilcox agreed to clear a certain amount of land, build a pier on the river, a railroad running to the ocean and a bathhouse at the site of the present day Casino. Wilcox interested investors from Western New York in the project, among them Lawrence Ryckman. A stock company was formed and the resort town of Melbourne Beach came into being, preceding Daytona Beach and Palm Beach by several years.

Undoubtedly, promotional literature distributed by steamship companies and railroads of the time had its influence among Northerners, and there is a good chance that these original investors in Melbourne Beach had read Guide to Florida by a promoter who titled himself "Sylvia Sunshine." To put it mildly, Sylvia's writing in 1875 is enthusiastic. The 192 pages of Guide to Florida are ecstatic. After a time the constant hyperbole becomes deafening. Describing Southern Brevard County she states:

"From Wittfelds the wind wafts us to the lower end of Merritt's Island, the finest camping ground in Eastern Florida. The largest bass are taken at this point. Here we enter the Indian River.... Snowy herons, Spanish curlew, grey pelicans, oyster-birds, doves, men-of-war hawks, ibises, gannets, cormorants and similar birds can be shot at every turn. The Indian River is certainly a paradise for ornithologists."

Sylvia also described the area as a place where "jilted lovers can find consolation."

Offered this bit of derring-do:

"In May bears flock to the beaches in search of turtle eggs. Nothing can be more inspiring than a moonlight bearhunt on the beach."

Lest some of her readers began to disbelieve her high-blown rhetoric, Sylvia could come down to earth with:

"The great trouble with many of the guides is their inordinate fondness for liquor."

The highly readable introduction by Rembert W. Patrick to Guide to Florida, which was reprinted in 1964 by the University of Florida Press deals in some of the folklore of the time. Boarding housekeepers supposedly adopted the motto "Pay as you go, or go away." They wanted no deadbeat Yankee riffraff.

Many tourists were referred to as "ducks" because of the preponderance of females among them who were "large of bosom, broad of beam, flocking together, waddling amiably behind a guide and quacking all the time."

A colorful brochure was printed in the precise genre of Guide to Florida. Complete with a map of the proposed town, its purpose was to sell lots to Yankees. It shows present day streets that were not built until the 1950's. Included in the brochure was a temperature chart for the year 1888 and a quote from the deed which stated that the Melbourne and Atlantic Railroad Company was to forever have the right to operate. The present day reader should find the following bit of salesmanship interesting:

"Melbourne Beach, lying below the frost line and near the Gulf Stream, with salt water surrounding and elevated position, has a climate whose temperature varies but little from season to season. With freedom from fogs and miasmatic vapors, the winter exempt from chilly blasts, the summers are cool and delight-

ful, with a prevailing fresh breeze from the (Atlantic) southeast during the day, followed by light land breezes during the night. The climate of Brevard County is distinct and notably different from that of other sections of the State and Gulf Coast region. The favorable record of temperature . . . is such that bathing at Ocean Beach is enjoyable nearly everyday of the year. Being already famous for superior fruitfulness in oranges, pineapples, lemons, bananas, etc., all kinds of vegetables, with abundance of game, fish, and oysters . . . all combine to attract the intending purchaser of a winter home to this healthful and desirable locality."

The brochure goes on to tell about the Indian River Steamboat Company's first class passenger service, the 12-inch artesian well at the foot of Ocean Avenue (which is still put to good use) and "the Commodious bathhouse with 12 rooms."

According to Nance's history, The East Coast of Florida, tourist river travel, mostly by steamboat, began in the early 1880's and really opened up the area. The investors in Melbourne Beach had every reason to be optimistic. But for various reasons, mainly the death of key persons in the stock company and the ensuing legal problems involved, the resort project was very slow getting off the ground. However the dock, the bathhouse, and the railroad were completed in 1889. The railroad consisted of a single push car to traverse the 7/10 miles from River to Ocean.

Just before the improvements that Wilcox promised actually got underway, there came to Melbourne Beach a dauntless pair of ladies, mother and daughter, whose name was Cummings. They had come south for their husband's/father's health, but while staying in Melbourne the winter of 1887-1888, he passed away. His heirs decided to stay, and Major Graves sold them two acres of scrub bordering the foot path that is now Ocean Avenue. These ladies had dreams of being a part of a tourist mecca, and during the winter of 1888-89 they built a large boarding house to help accommodate the many tourists, who, they were sure, were soon to flock to Melbourne Beach.

The building of Myrtle Cottage, which still stands at the northeast corner of Ocean Avenue and Pine Street, was a trial and an agony. Miss Cummings explained some 31 years later in 1920.

> "We . . . had the lot cleared where Myrtle Cottage now stands, and lumber ordered from Titusville. My cousin, Fredrick Wheeler, and another carpenter came with us to build the house. We camped in the old House of Refuge a mile south on the Beach, until our shack was ready. In this shack 8 x 16, without floors or windows, my Aunt, the carpenter's mother, and I lived while

the house was being built. This was one of unusually rainy winters we rarely have. Rain four days out of seven made it hard for us in the shack as well as delaying the building. All the lumber had to be carried on a man's back from the dock, Mr. Wheeler improvising two wooden wheels to drag the heavy timbers on. Our drinking water came from a bottomless barrel sunk in the river beach, until we could get a well driven. Through the kindness of Mr. Hector who owned a sailboat and a store in Melbourne, and also R. W. Beaujean and his sailboat, Adelaide, who came often to the Beach, we were kept well stocked with provisions. But I could tell you of one time we were near our last crumb. But God cares for people as well as sparrows."

Before Myrtle Cottage was completed, R. W. Beaujean built the house on the riverfront that later also served as a post office and moved his wife and two boys, Don and Claude, to Melbourne Beach. This house was moved twice in later years; in the late 1940's it was moved to its present location, 325 Avenue A. Also in that same year (1889), Captain Wilcox built the front part of the home that stands at 522 Ocean Avenue. Built also that year by Jacob Fox is Ruth Ryckman's home at 517 Ocean Ave.

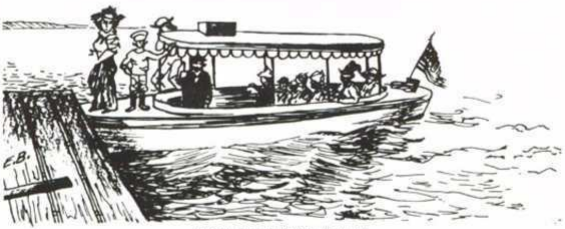
In 1892 a non-denominational Community Chapel was erected at the northwest corner of Ocean Avenue and Pine Street. The building was enlarged somewhat in the early 1940's. In giving the land Major Graves stipulated in the deed that the church was to remain forever non-denominational. The first trustees were Henry Whiting, R. W. Beaujean, and S. M. King. Previous to the erection of the Chapel Sunday School and church, services were held at Myrtle Cottage.

ORIGINAL CHAPEL - 1892

School was started. Miss Cummings volunteered as a teacher. The small building that housed the school burned in 1918. There were eight pupils: Don and Claude Beaujean, Jacob Fox's three children, and three pupils from the House of Refuge. Though short on formal education, Miss Cummings was long on ability and it is said that her students became quite knowledgeable.

Mail service came in 1892. But only three times a week. S. M. King was the first mailcarrier. In 1894 R. W. Beaujean became postmaster, and mail came daily across the river from Melbourne on his ferry.

One must remember the importance of boats to Melbourne Beach. They were the sole means of communication with the outside world. The bridge across to Indialantic was not constructed until 1921. Previous to 1902, the ferry was a sailboat, the Adelaide. Then in 1902, Mr. Beaujean obtained a motor launch which he christened the Jessie B. Daily runs were made across to Melbourne to pick up and deliver the mail and to obtain supplies and groceries for the town's struggling residents.



FERRY UNLOADING AT PIER

It was a regular practice in these early days to wrap up an old newspaper to send across the river to the grocery store as mail. Then the grocer would send it back. Why? In order to justify Melbourne Beach as

a separate post office, a certain amount of Melbourne mail had to go out and come in. The townspeople wanted to make sure they didn't lose their post office.

Two or three times a week residents would send their grocery orders across. There were three stores they enjoyed patronizing, including Edges and Rhodes. When the ferry returned, they would be placed on the flatcar and delivered up Ocean Avenue, door to door. The railroad extended out to the spur on the pier where the ferry docked.

People on the mainland had a practice which greatly annoyed Melbourne Beach residents. At this time Florida was open range; no fences were required for livestock. Certain individuals would bring their cattle, but especially pigs, across by boat to let them range free in the scrub, returning periodically to check on them or to round up the now fattened livestock. There was a certain nettle, the root of which especially appealed to the pigs. And they were forever digging them up and making "pig holes" which a resident could easily step in at night and break an ankle. It was always necessary to carry a lantern when going out at night.

There was a certain compensation, however. The "bear meat" most residents ate from time to time tasted strangely like pork. When one of the men shot a pig, it was shared all around. Having no refrigeration, it had to be eaten within hours. It has also been said that guilty consciences and fear of the owner's imminent arrival sometimes caused indigestion from a hastily eaten dish of "bear" meat.

There was more than one incident. Once an owner had caught and staked a pig in a fire trail a little north of Ocean Avenue and left it. When he returned he found that it had been shot and taken. The trail seemed to lead to a cottage where two totally harmless and innocent single ladies lived. The owner was raving mad, and he had a gun. Before the man was pacified, he had threatened to shoot everyone in town.

Several people set out pineapple patches. Among them were Miss Cummings, Henry Whiting, R. W. Beaujean, C. V. Gillis. They thrived, and it appeared that they had every possibility of becoming a big money maker. But then--disaster. The freeze of 1895, known for years afterwards as the Big Freeze, wiped them out. Virtually every crop in Florida, especially the citrus industry, was set back for years.

Mosquitoes were legion. They were one point that the advertising brochures left out. They were of course worse in the summer, but they often lingered into the winter. Residents kept smudge pots burning in their yards when they were especially bad. Women would wear gunny sacks about their legs and net over their faces if they had to be out for any length of time. Men would line their legs inside their trousers with

newspapers. And of course everybody carried a mosquito switch. This could be a piece of pine or palmetto to shoo them from the body. There was a regular routine: First the right shoulder, then the left leg; then the left shoulder, then right leg. It was said that livestock would at times wade up to their necks in the brackish Indian River to escape this scourge.

There are numerous mosquito stories. One relates that strong muscular ones would push their little brothers through the woven wire of screen doors to unlatch the door in order to let the bigger ones in.

Another story goes that a visiting Yankee sent a snapshot of some well-ladened orange trees to friends up north during the height of the mosquito season. He got this reply: "The trees are scrubby, but the turkeys roosting in them are large and fat."

This problem was greatly alleviated in the early 1950's when the mosquito control district was set up.

Turtle hunting was a popular pastime. But even here one had to be careful, for bears were as interested in the eggs which the giant sea turtles would deposit in the sand as the humans were.

The Cummings ladies ran a good boarding house. Despite the fact that their town did not boom along with Palm Beach, there were boarders during the winter. Myrtle Cottage also acted as a restaurant for the town. The story is told that it was a regular practice during cold spells to take a kerosene heater from room to room in the morning for guests to dress by. There was, of course, a large fireplace in the downstairs living room. One guest in these early days states that it was so cold at times that one could hear guests' teeth chattering through the walls in other bedrooms.

These ladies were frugal; they had to be, as the rest of the town's people had to be, for supplies were not readily at hand. Once more people came for Sunday dinner than had reckoned on with the result that 17 dinners were served from one chicken.

The young people of the town enjoyed simple, innocent pleasures that would have less appeal to today's youth. Exploring was one of them. There were perhaps half a dozen vacant homes scattered through the scrub, the owners having left after the big freeze of '95 had ruined their dreams. These were exciting to explore, and to the youthful imagination they were, of course, haunted. These young people seemed oblivious to the danger of rattlesnakes, of which there were plenty.

DESERTED HOUSE AFTER 1895 FREEZE

It was a popular pastime in the evenings to sit on various porches to chat and sing. Occasionally, too, there would be moonlight strolls on the beach or perhaps sailing in the river with a stop in Melbourne for ice cream.

In these days it was stated that all one had to do to get a boat load of fish was to place a lantern in the bottom of a boat in the river at night and they would simply jump in.

The young people built a tennis court at the site of the present Fire House on Ocean Avenue. They rowed boats north to about the present day intersection of River Road and Sunset Blvd. and destroyed a shell mound for its surface. On top of this they put a thin coating of cement.

PART II

Melbourne Beach can be said to have had in its history four distinct boom periods. The first, of course, was its founding in 1888 with the building of the pier, the railroad, and the bathhouse. This was the only access people had to the ocean for many miles north or south. The second can be said to have been in 1908, when Lawrence Ryckman bought up all the interests of the other original shareholders in Wilcox plat and founded the Melbourne Beach Improvement Company. The third boom came in the early twenties; the fourth, as most people are well aware was the early 1950's with the activation of a missile test center at Cape Canaveral.

But let us here concern ourselves with phases of this second boom.

By 1908, things had run down terribly. Patching up estates of the original Melbourne Beach Company's shareholders blocked further improvements. The pier was falling down. The push-car could only go halfway to the ocean for the sun had warped the rails beyond there. R. W. Beaujean, the Cummings ladies, and the few others that hung on barely eked out a living. In 1908 Ryckman and his son, Lawrence Jr., formed the Melbourne Beach Improvement Company. It was a stock company, chartered in New York State. Don Beaujean traveled there endeavoring to interest prospective buyers.

With Lawrence Ryckman Jr. and Don Beaujean as general handymen, improvements began. The pier was rebuilt. The bathhouse was repaired with new and rebuilt pitcher pumps added. The railroad was repaired so that the new Buda Motor Car could travel the entire distance. The fare was ten cents each for the ten passengers it could hold. A new ferry, the Ida Mae, a rebuilt 23 passenger sailboat, was launched by Don and Claude Beaujean. A regular schedule of 5 round trips a day was inaugurated. The fare was twenty-five cents round trip.

The first house was built on the ocean in 1909, the present day front of the Surf Apartments. By 1912, W. L. Sweet thought enough of the potentialities of Melbourne Beach to erect a hotel, the Villa Marine. This hotel, which appears to a modern day observer to be more of a large home, was built at the corner of Ocean Avenue and River Road. The blocks were made on the spot, the sand coming from a large pit that was dug along side of the hotel. A colorful advertising pamphlet was issued extolling once more the virtues of Melbourne Beach, this one no less guilty of overstatement than the one issued some twenty years previous.

VILLA MARINE HOTEL ABOUT 1915

The investors in Melbourne Beach were very much aware of the thriving Daytona Beach and Palm Beach resorts, and that their project had preceded them by several years. Would Melbourne Beach boom this time? Optimism ruled supreme.

In 1915 an $8,000 power plant was installed at the foot of Ocean Avenue. It was run by a water wheel which ran from the pressure created by the flow of the 12-inch well which had been drilled in 1888. The wheel ran constantly to keep the two sets of 110 volt batteries charged. Wires were strung to the twelve homes, two boarding houses, and the Villa Marine. At peak times both batteries had to be used, but the electricity provided generally proved to be rather feeble. It was not very economical, and within a year or two the idea was given up. Power lines were finally string across the river in the early twenties.

In March, 1915 the Woman's Club was founded. For the first eight years of its existence, it was known as the Ramblers Club. There were seventeen charter members, most of them regular winter visitors. After some flirtation with the idea of being a literary club, the ladies decided that their forte lay in civic work.

Their first project was to build a sidewalk from the river to the ocean. One must remember that in these days, unless one walked the cross ties on the railroad, he walked in the sand. A sidewalk was definately needed.

Numerous money-making schemes were undertaken. Among them were a cross tie walking contest, a spelling bee, card parties, food sales, and "a series of five illustrated travel talks, netting $72.25" by a local World Traveler. The sidewalk, a good portion of which still exists, was completed in 1918.

The ladies contributed much toward the Red Cross during the first World War. Besides a $125.00 cash donation, they made 500 compresses, 87 pairs of socks, 25 sweaters, 15 pairs of wristlets, 12 trench caps, and 2 hospital blankets.

A circulating library was started in 1917, with the first contribution of four books. It continued to grow, but ceased to function in the early 1950's.

The greatest contribution of the Woman's Club, the one having the most permanent significance, was the Club House or the Community Center as it is now known.

In the affluent, inflationary, and optimistic year of 1919, the ladies decided to take on this project. A building committee, including Mrs. Ella Oliver, was appointed. Plans were drawn, read, and accepted. As a Woman's Club history written in 1936 so quaintly states: "The cost of the building was $5,200. The next vital question was how to raise $5,200 to pay Mr. Grau, the contractor."

The Melbourne State Bank agreed to loan $3,000 at 6%, their regular rate being 8% if they could raise $2,500 on their own.

A mass meeting was held at the Villa Marine at the invitation of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Sweet and his mother. A free boat brought over many Melbourne business men and the money was subscribed.

On February 5th, 1920 with nearly 100 people present, the cornerstone was laid. Placed in the cornerstone by John Alden Beaujean, the first baby born in Melbourne Beach, was a can containing among other things a copy of the Melbourne Times, names of the fifteen children on the beach, a penny for each child, and minutes of the club meeting at which it was decided to build, and a poem entitled "Evolution of Melbourne Beach."

On the program that day, Miss Grace Cummings read her history with its somewhat overstated subtitle, "This Now Famous Resort." Prayer

was said, an address was given, the Star Spangled Banner sung, and Old Glory was raised.

By March 17, 1920, the ladies could hold their first meeting there. Palmetto leaves were hung across the yet to be completed windows.

WOMAN'S CLUB IN 1920

By various means including card parties, ministrel shows, moving pictures, rummage sales, bunco parties, spelling bees, tureen suppers, Jiggs dinners, the sale of guava paste, and dances the club was able to pay off its debt by March 1925.

The third boom period, which some could say was in reality a continuation of the second, was a direct result of the Woman's Club rejuvenatory activities. If one wishes to give a date as the beginning of this third period, 1918 is as good as any. People were optimistic. There was plenty of money to spend, though war-inspired inflation drove prices up. The cost of a trip on Beaujean's ferry went up from twenty-five to thirty-five cents. A few more homes were being built. Power lines were strung across the river, and Melbourne Beach at last had electricity.

And then in 1921, the biggest news of all--the bridge.

Ernest Kouwen-Hoven was a man with a dream--an exclusive resort. In this day of fast-expanding motor travel, the only obvious way for the tourists to get to his property just north of Melbourne Beach was to build a bridge and to pave a road to the beach. The bridge was a narrow wooden structure which stretched across the entire width of the Indian River to present day 5th Avenue in Indialantic. It lasted until 1947, when the present causeway was built. It was a toll bridge, and some doubters called it "Kouwen-Hoven's Folly" but it was a success. The State Road Department took it over in 1930.

Kouwen-Hoven obviously had access to more money for his development than anyone in Melbourne Beach had ever had. He built streets, the palatial Tradewinds Hotel, a nine-hole golf course, and a bathhouse on the ocean. He also began building Mirimar Avenue, or highway A1A south toward Melbourne Beach.

It was time for Melbourne Beach interests to get a move on so as not to be outdone by this threat to the north. The answer lay in incorporation. That way street bonds could be floated, streets paved, Oak Street (A1A) pushed through to the north to meet Kouwen-Hoven at the town line.

Everyone in town, less than one-hundred souls, turned out for a mass meeting held in the Club House on March 4, 1923. It was unanimously decided to incorporate. Attorney David Peel was appointed to draw up a charter which he presented to the town four months later for a fee of $125. Among the distinctions of this charter were a three-man commission and the power of the town to levy up to two mills for advertising purposes. The original commissioners were Lena W. Lamb, Mayor; Roger W. Sweet, Vice-Mayor; and Don R. Beaujean, Clerk. They were sworn in by Attorney Peel on June 9, 1923, the date of the first regular meeting of the commission. The first business was to draw up rules of order, to settle compensation, and to hire an engineer to survey and estimate the cost of paving Ocean Avenue, River Road from Sunset Blvd. to Second Avenue, and Atlantic Street from Ocean Avenue to Third Avenue. As the town needed funds to get started, $750 was borrowed from the Melbourne State Bank.

The estimates were soon in; Carl Fay, a contractor who had his equipment in Indialantic, was hired to grub and grade these streets at 45 cents per cubic yard preparatory to paving. The optimism of the era is shown in that the commission did not wait until preliminary work was begun; at the same time in June of 1923, the town attorney was asked to draw up a $30,000 street bond proposal. To a person of these boom times, it was obvious that no bonding house would turn Melbourne Beach down!

Tax assessment for 1923 was 10 mills, of which 3.7 mills went for paying bond interest; 2 mills was allotted for street maintenance, .5 mills was given over to publicity, while 3.8 mills was set aside for general purposes.

The first regular election was held in February, 1924, when Mrs. Lamb was returned to office. There were 50 registered voters in the town.

The year 1924 was a big one for Melbourne Beach. The boom fever ran high. By the end of that year electric power had come, a town marshall hired at $60 a year, the Casino was built on the site of the original bathhouse, and the 16 foot wide shell road was pushed through linking up with Indialantic. The next year in December, the first traffic accident was recorded at the intersection of Ocean Avenue and Atlantic Street.

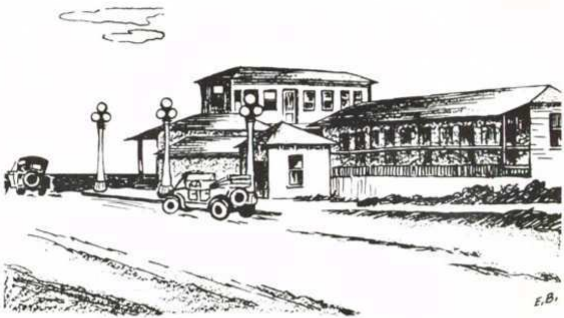
The paving work, the contractor using "water bonded macadam base and bituminous surface" was finished and accepted in September, 1924. The streets were furnished with wooden curbs. "Parkways" were cleared at the east end of First, Second, and Third Avenue for beach access. There was much talk of beautification, and some actual doing. The first ordinance posted the previous year concerned the cleaning up of vacant lots. Coconut palms and oleander bushes were planted the length of Ocean Avenue. Australian Pines and oleanders lined Oak Street.

Speeders in the town became a problem. In several places, automobiles were running over and ruining the wooden curbs. Speed signs were ordered posted, and cars were ordered to stop parking at the corner of Atlantic and Third Avenue, then the most southernly point of present-day A1A.

A sign of the times can be seen in the complaint registered in the town minutes June 2, 1925, by a resident on Avenue B. The families of Negro laborers, then grubbing and clearing streets, were bathing in the ocean near her home. The town marshall was instructed to post signs instructing these people to swim 1¼ miles south, out of the town limits.

A great deal of land was traded back and forth, and a modest building boom occurred. Many of the homes today standing in "old" Melbourne Beach were erected during these years. River Road was referred to by a more poetic "Riverside Drive" though it only extended as far as Sunset Blvd.

At that time, the Casino had a glass-enclosed second story (a vicious northeaster in the late twenties blew it into the pool). Here the salesmen from such companies as Indian River and Atlantic Ocean Homes, Melbourne Beach Estates, and Gulf Stream Land Company would beguile potential customers. From this vantage point atop the Casino, one could see the whole area and it is not too difficult to imagine the cajolery, the backslaping, the expensive cigars, the wheeling and dealing. "Why over there" would say the salesman, expansively, pointing in the direction of a certain portion of rattlesnake infested scrub, "over there we plan for the location of our Drug Store. And beside it, why we already have a definite commitment for a Buick Motor Car Agency and... what's that? When will the street be put in? Well now, my boy, I see you lack faith, you lack Vision, why just next week we've been promised..."



ORIGINAL CASINO, ABOUT 1925

Land values soared. By 1927 the peak assessment for more than twenty-five years was reached: $803,000. The average 60 by 150 foot lot sold for $250. A long way indeed from the $1.25 an acre that Major Graves had paid in 1883! A statement from the town minutes of August 21, 1925 makes the point:

> "Commission went into session for the purpose of examining the assessment roll. Few changes were made except on acreage, but the great advance for such property led the commission to decide the assessor was fair in change made in valuation."

Conditions were not always so harmonious in Town Hall, however. Later, after the boom had ended there arose a heated controversy over a proposal to build a "tourist camp" as certain townspeople called it, or "Garden Court Apartments" as the would-be builder labeled his project. The site was just east of the present Jackson's Market on Ocean Avenue. The builder had already sunk a deep artesian well (today a minor swamp) and begun his foundation when the following exchange, as recorded in the Town Minutes, took place at a somewhat rowdy Town Meeting. It is classic in its unconscious humor:

"Mrs. B. requested the drawing up of an ordinance prohibiting the establishment of a Tourist Camp at the Beach.....

Mrs. S. then said "I make a motion that we request the Commission to formulate an ordinance prohibiting the establishment of a Camp within the corporate limits of the Town of Melbourne Beach, and that Promiscuour Camping be done away with".

This motion was seconded by Mrs. O., voted upon and adopted.

Mrs. L. then asked if it would be all right to have one's friends camp upon their own land, and Mrs. S. told her she thought the expression "Promiscuous Camping" took care of her question".

Social life was far from neglected. Parties were held weekly at the Club House and sometimes at the Casino. These were days of Prohibition. It was all "good clean fun" as can be seen from the titles of two newspaper accounts in the Orlando Sentinel and the Melbourne Times: "Melbourne Beach Costume Ball Provides Heaps of Fun" and "Excellent Musical Dramatic Program Given at Melbourne Beach Monday". A lively newspaper, The Sandspur, whose motto was "We Cover the Beach" was started by Joe Cook. The talented Mr. Cook under the pen name "Joe Beamish" had published a book of verse entitled The Cook Book. A poem of his entitled "Melbourne Beach" is included at the end of this history. Later, in 1928 when the bubble had burst and the town fathers were having difficulty collecting taxes from the absentee lot owners, Cook wrote a humorous interchange of letters between a fictional town clerk trying to collect taxes and the innocent owner of "Lot 24, Block 28, Wilcox Subdivision". In this series the lot owner stated that since he had gotten the lot as something just tossed in a bet and that it had cost him nothing, he assumed it was worth nothing, and furthermore he had "never heard of Melbourne Beach" and asked its location and population. The clerk replied with such phrases as "our size is debatable because of the action of the tides", "I can't give you exact population figures as someone might leave before I finish this letter", and "In looking on a map you will find that Melbourne is a suburb of Melbourne Beach".

A violent storm, coming from the west, struck Melbourne Beach on July 27, 1926, damaging the pier and wrecking a number of boats and boathouses and littering the shore with wreckage. A special policeman, E. J. Ballard, had to be hired to protect it. This storm presaged the end. The bubble was about to burst.

OCEAN AVENUE, LOOKING EAST IN MID-1920'S

EPILOGUE

It was said in those Depression days following the big Boom that a dog could lie all day in the middle of Ocean Avenue and not a soul would come by to disturb him. Somnolent, Melbourne Beach dozed in the summer sun. Only a sleepy hum and buzz permeated the stillness. The river slapped lazily at the pilings of the now decaying pier. An occasional gull would lift its head, blink into the sunlight, decide it wasn't worth the effort, and go back to sleep. Asphalt softened and smelled in the afternoon sun. On the beach the ocean winked and crinkled like shiny tinfoil.

Nothing stirred. Few people remained in the little town during the summer months. Life came to a virtual standstill. Months could go by without the Town Commission having to meet. A special election held in 1945 drew only 17 voters.

The aging, narrow Indialantic bridge became a desperation to drive. Heavy delivery trucks from the mainland were hesitant to make the trip. Accidents were common. Over the years a number of vehicles crashed through the thin railings to the brackish waters below. The present Mayor of Eau Gallie, Adger Smith, and his father met this fate in 1941. The father was lost.

Weeds grew in the streets. The wooden curbs disappeared under a blanket of sandspurs. The little town at the end of the road slept, like Rip Van Winkle, for twenty years. Few visitors came and a low point in civic pride was reached when one resident began burning garbage in the street.

Scheme after promotional scheme was talked about: A bus to bring tourists from Melbourne; a sign pointing the way to the town on U.S. 1. Hope was aroused when one large acreage holder thought there was a chance of a military academy locating on his property.

But nothing ever happened. The townspeople talked and hoped and then talked some more. The adage about talk being cheap fitted beautifully in those days. It was all one could afford. That, and hope.

All over Florida conditions were the same--inflated land values, grandiose schemes, paper profits, bonded indebtedness. Melbourne Beach was in the same boat as the rest. $80,000 bonded indebtedness is a tremendous amount of money for a municipality of less than 100 souls to pay off. But they did it--though it took a long, long, time. The story in the town minutes for 26 years from November 30, 1927 to January 15, 1953, is the story of how to pay these bonds. Twice early in these years the suggestion was even made to dissolve as a municipality. After the bottom

was hit in 1933 when only $609 was collected in taxes, and the town treasury at one time contained only $43, conditions gradually improved until our last--and by far the biggest boom took off in the early 1950's. But before it did the conditions existing can best be summed up by the remark of a local resident who stated: "In them days, boy, you didn't do much sports fishin'. You did eat'n fishing'".

POPULATION OF MELBOURNE BEACH

1890	15 (estimated)
1900	20 (estimated)
1910	30 (estimated)
1920	50 (estimated)
1930	72 (first U.S. census)
1940	90
1950	230
1960	1002
1968	2800 (estimated)

TOWN OFFICIALS OF MELBOURNE BEACH

Mayor

Lena W. Lamb	1924 - 1937
H. J. Mitchell	1937 - 1940
Don R. Beaujean	1940 - 1943
Katherine Huber	1943 - 1946
Dewey G. Arnold	1946 - 1949
R. J. Parsons	1949 - 1958
Orville Price	1958 - 1961
John W. Qed	1961 - 1964
Thomas J. Moldenhouer	1964 -

Vice - Mayor

Roger W. Sweet	1924 - 1930
Frank V. R. Stillman	1930 - 1935
Stella W. Tenney	1933 - 1936
Harry G. Gill	1936 - 1939
Edward V. Johnson	1939 - 1942
W. B. Sandford	1942 - 1945
Ruth E. Ryckman	1945 -
E. J. Ballard	1946 - 1954
John Hahn	1954 - 1955
Frank Casper	1955 - 1957
Earl Huke	1957 - 1959
Paul J. Erlebach	1959 - 1963
Sam Dobbs	1963 - 1965
Roland Phillips	1965 - 1966
Adner Perry	1966 -
James Broomfield	1966 - 1967
Richard Wallace	1967 -

Clerks

Don R. Beaujean	1924 - 1938
Walter C. Nichols	1938 - 1941
W. G. Mead	1941 - 1947
Ashley Kilburn	1947 - 1948
Lewis Watson	1948 -
Earl Huke	1948 - 1953
Paul Summers	1953 - 1955
Gwelda Brand	1956 - 1959
Orville Campbell	1959 - 1962
Thomas J. Moldenhouer	1962 - 1964
W. W. Kerr III	1964 - 1966
Val M. Steele	1966 -

Tax Assessor - Collector

Eleanor Redding	1967 -

Public Works

Walter Hixenbaugh	1967 -

MELBOURNE BEACH

by Joe Cook

(1928)

If you follow my directions
I'll take you to a place
Where contentment lies at anchor,
And true happiness you'll face.
It's half way down the Eastern coast,
Smiled on by Florida's sun;
It's over on the ocean side
Away from everyone.
It isn't large, it isn't small,
It's just the proper size.
There's one long avenue or road
That is the town's main street;
I call it Friendship Boulevard
You know all whom you meet;
For everyone is friendly
And likes his neighbors well,
And what does life hold better
Than among good friends to dwell?

We have our weekly parties
At the Club House 'cross the way,
And we all join in the bathing
At the beach most every day.
We all are sort of robins
And our winter homes are here;
We have our golf, our tennis,
And our fishing--all are near;
For the sailor there is sailing,
There are breezes every day,
But sometimes breezes blow to winds--
What havoc they can play!
Name your favorite recreation
It is surely within reach;
Contentment, true contentment
Can be found in Melbourne Beach.

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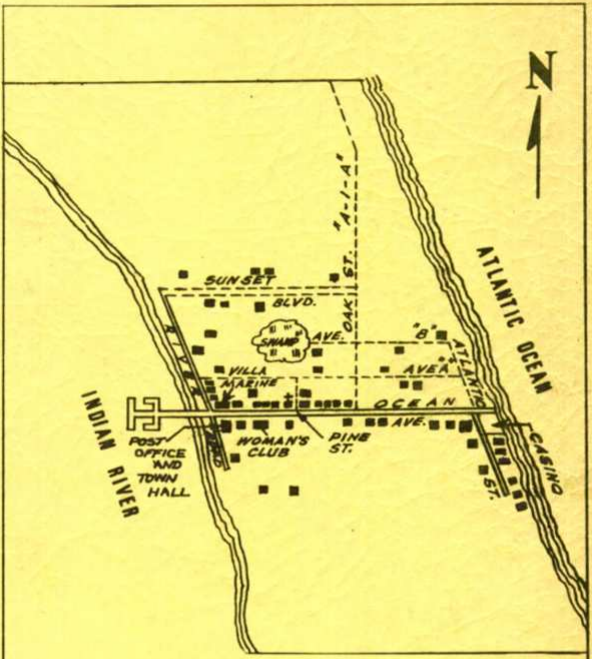

TOWN OF MELBOURNE BEACH, FLORIDA

1928

LEGEND:

PAVED ROAD

UNPAVED ROAD - - - - -

OCEAN TO RIVER . 7 MI.